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DE RUEHYN #1537/01 2300937  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 180937Z AUG 09  
FM AMEMBASSY SANAA  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2593

UNCLAS SANAA 001537

SIPDIS

FOR NEA/ARP AMACDONALD AND PM/WRA DHADRIK

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PARM](#) [PREL](#) [KHDP](#) [YM](#)

SUBJECT: GOOD NEWS FROM YEMEN: PROGRESS IN DEMINING

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. On August 9, PolOff observed the destruction of 2985 landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) in a ceremony organized by the Yemeni Executive Mine Action Committee (YEMAC), which is responsible for implementing one of the world's most successful mine action programs. Since 1999, YEMAC has cleared more than 679 square kilometers of contaminated land in Yemen, significantly reducing casualty rates and making land available for herding, farming, irrigation, and other vital economic activity. This impressive accomplishment has been made possible by more than \$14 million in USG support over the past decade. Continued USG support for YEMAC will not only help the ROYG achieve its goal of being mine-impact free by 2014, but will build goodwill among Yemeni officials and citizens, advancing U.S. humanitarian and counter-terrorism interests. END SUMMARY.

#### BACKGROUND

¶2. (U) Yemen is contaminated with landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) as a result of four different conflicts: the 1962-1975 war in the north between republicans and royalists, the 1963-1967 war of independence in the south, the 1970-1983 war against left-wing guerrillas along the border between the former North and South Yemen, and the 1994 civil war. A survey conducted in 2000 determined that there were a total of 592 mine-impacted communities in Yemen, contaminating approximately 922 square kilometers in 18 of 21 governorates.

Most landmines were laid during the latter two conflicts along the former North-South border and in the southern governorates, with Hadramaut governorate the most contaminated. (Note: Since fighting broke out in 2004 between Houthi rebels and government forces in the northern governorate of Sa'ada, there have been credible reports of the use of landmines by the Houthis, though no survey has been conducted to assess the nature or extent of the problem. End Note.)

¶3. (U) The ROYG allocates about \$3.5 million annually for mine action, which is carried out by the Yemeni Executive Mine Action Committee (YEMAC) under the leadership of Colonel Mansour Al-Azi. YEMAC is staffed by soldiers seconded from the Engineering Forces of the Ministry of Defense (MOD). They receive an incentive of 450 riyals (roughly \$2.50) per day for this dangerous work. In the past decade, 16 deminers have suffered casualties.

¶4. (U) Human suffering and economic loss due to landmines and UXO are significant. In the past decade, there have been over 5000 registered landmine/UXO casualties in Yemen, with 2560 victims killed and 2344 injured. Landmines and UXO hinder economic activity by blocking access to lands for grazing and agriculture, water sources for drinking and irrigation, and roads for travel to markets. They also impede infrastructure and social development projects. For a poor country where only 2.6 percent of land is arable, ensuring that once-mined areas are safe and accessible to the local population is essential for economic growth and social welfare.

## IMPRESSIVE RESULTS

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¶15. (U) YEMAC's mine action program is one of the ROYG's few success stories. By the end of 2008, the total estimated suspected hazardous area had dropped to 215 square kilometers (down from 922). By mid-2009, YEMAC had removed a total of 274,455 landmines/UXO from across the country. Clearance had been completed in all 14 communities highly affected by landmines/UXO, except for three minefields that are permanently marked as dangerous because they cannot be cleared with existing technology. Additionally, clearance had been completed in 75 of the 86 medium-impacted communities, with mine action currently occurring in six others. The governorates of Aden, Hajja, Dhamar, Sana'a, and Hudaydah were declared mine-impact free in 2007. The national landmine/UXO casualty rate has dropped to one per month. YEMAC was rated in the top three of 16 mine action programs evaluated by the UN. By making land available for grazing, beekeeping, and agriculture, and by providing villagers with safe access to water sources and markets, the UN concluded that, in Yemen, the economic benefits of mine action actually exceed the costs of demining. This progress in mine action is even more impressive given the scope of Yemen's landmine/UXO problem and the difficulty posed by its harsh deserts and rugged mountain terrain.

## EXPLOSIVE EVENT

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¶16. (U) On August 9, PolOff observed the destruction of 2985 landmines and UXO (which had been collected over the previous eight months) in a ceremony organized by YEMAC in a desert area in Lahj governorate, about a half-hour northeast of Aden. The items destroyed included 985 shells, 15 anti-personnel mines, 3 anti-tank mines, 444 missiles, 93 RPG rounds, and 1344 fuses and detonators. Chairman of the National Demining Committee Ahmed Qassim al-Ajam, Governor of Lahj Muhsen Ali Al-Naqib, and other notables attended the event. (Note: No other foreign diplomats were present. End Note.) YEMAC demolition experts destroyed mines and UXO in eight successive detonations over a period of approximately 10 minutes. Following the destruction, Naqib thanked the USG and other donors for their support.

## A DECADE OF USG SUPPORT

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¶17. (U) The USG has provided nearly \$14 million towards mine action in Yemen since FY 1997. (Note: The Department of State has provided \$8.98 million in NADR funding for technical survey, clearance, and mine risk education, while the Department of Defense contributed \$4.69 million for training and equipment. End Note.) This aid has helped YEMAC establish and equip demining companies, carry out landmine/UXO risk education, and provide medical assistance to victims. The current focus of U.S. aid is to replenish equipment that wears out quickly in Yemen's harsh climate and terrain.

## COMMENT

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¶18. (SBU) The ROYG's mine action program is one of the few good news stories emerging from Yemen, and USG support has been vital to its success. YEMAC's staff is highly trained and professional, they take evident pride in their work, and they are grateful for sustained USG support since YEMAC's inception in 1998. (Note: During the 2000 attack on the USS Cole, U.S.-trained Yemeni demining troops were the first on the scene, and worked tirelessly to aid U.S. sailors. End Note.) Continued USG support for mine action in Yemen will not only help the ROYG achieve its goal of being mine-impact free by 2014, but will also build goodwill among Yemeni officials and citizens, advancing U.S. humanitarian and counter-terrorism interests in a high-priority country. END COMMENT.

